



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Covid Learning and Support Scheme (CLASS)

Guidance for Primary and
Special Schools

September 2021

Introduction

This guidance from the Department of Education provides primary and special schools with a framework for providing additional supports for pupils who have been most impacted by the disruption to in-school education resulting from Covid. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the Department's Circular Letter 0045/2021 Covid Learning and Support Scheme: <https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/aec0a-covid-learning-and-support-scheme/> which outlines details of the CLASS (Covid Learning and Support Scheme) to be delivered in schools during the 2021/2022 school year.

Additional measures are being provided to primary and special schools, as a once off temporary allocation, for the 2021/2022 school year. Additional Covid-targeted teaching hours are being provided to each recognised school, from which schools can provide additional teaching support for pupils who, in their view, have been disproportionately impacted by the Covid school closures in relation to their learning and overall wellbeing or who are most at risk of educational disadvantage.

The desired outcomes are that schools will implement measures to enable pupils to fully engage in their learning during the 2021/2022 school year by providing additional support in relation to their educational and wellbeing needs.

This guidance is being provided for schools in order to specify how the additional teaching hours should best be used, as well as providing details of appropriate control and oversight measures required of schools.

Rationale for CLASS programme

Schools were closed over two periods in 2020 and 2021 and although priority was afforded to the re-opening of schools and special education provision at the earliest possible dates there has been disruption to in-school education over two school years.

Schools made very good efforts to provide remote teaching and learning during school closures. However, some pupils, particularly those with special educational needs, and those at risk of educational disadvantage may have experienced the impact of school closures in a very significant way. This impact is likely to have been further compounded by the loss of connectedness with school routines and engagement with teaching and learning.

In the school year 2021/2022, schools are being encouraged, through the extra resources provided under the CLASS programme, to support pupils who have been most impacted by the disruption in the previous two school years.

Aims of CLASS:

The provision of extra supports is intended to enable schools to:

- Provide additional targeted teaching support for pupils who have struggled most during the period of school closures including those with more complex special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage
- Provide access to additional teaching support for other pupils, who as a result of the impact of Covid now require targeted intervention to address their needs
- Ensure that pupils have a sufficient sense of physical, emotional and social wellbeing to engage in the learning
- Support co-curricular and extra-curricular activities to redress the negative impact on pupils' wellbeing and to continue to foster pupils' sense of safety, calm, efficacy and connectedness
- Identify and meet the gaps in learning, in skills, in readiness to learn or in the pupils' previously-identified priority learning needs in order to mitigate any potential regression in learning
- Allow for good routines to be re-established and maintained to the greatest extent possible so that all pupils can learn effectively
- Equip pupils with the necessary skills to experience success in learning throughout the school day.

Which pupils should be supported through the CLASS scheme?

Pupils who should be supported through the CLASS scheme are those who have been most affected by Covid.

In previous school years, schools will have prioritised a number of pupils for extra supports to target additional learning needs and promote wellbeing through the *Continuum of Support*. In this school year, it can be expected that a number of pupils who have not previously been identified as needing extra support may come to the fore due to the impact of Covid-related school closures on their education and wellbeing.

Schools have been given the flexibility to prioritise pupils for participation in CLASS. Priority should be given to those pupils for whom there is clear evidence that the Covid-related school closures had a significant impact on their education, wellbeing and functioning in daily life. The scope of CLASS may therefore extend beyond pupils with SEN and it is important that schools take time to identify ALL pupils who have emerging needs arising from the impact of Covid. These pupils may include those who have already been identified and newly-identified pupils with emerging needs due to the impact of Covid.

How can schools identify pupil need?

Schools have a number of effective systems and processes in place to identify pupils who need additional support at various stages throughout their time in school. In mainstream schools, the prioritisation of pupils for CLASS should be carried out collaboratively by the principal, class teachers, including all special class teachers, and special education teachers. In special schools, the process should be carried out by the in-school leadership team in consultation with the teaching and other appropriate staff. It is important that schools collaborate with the relevant pupils and their parents/guardians to ensure that the most appropriate pupils are identified and prioritised.

The *Continuum of Support* framework and the *Student Support File* process is already used in schools to assist in the identification of pupil needs, and as a problem-solving model of assessment and intervention that enables schools to gather and analyse data, as well as to plan and review the progress of individual pupils, as per *the Guidelines for Primary Schools Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*, which is available at <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Special-Education/Guidelines-for-Primary-Schools-Supporting-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs-in-Mainstream-Schools.pdf>

Role of teachers participating in CLASS

In accordance with the Circular, schools will allocate their additional CLASS teaching hours to teachers on a part-time basis. Schools should initially prioritise pupils for CLASS before deciding on the most effective way of deploying teaching supports. As the additional teaching hours may be used at any time during the 2021/2022 school year, schools may decide to deliver the programme on a weekly basis or alternatively in an intensive block of time.

CLASS is intended to be delivered during the normal school day, but it may be appropriate for some social activities to be scheduled during lunch breaks. The needs of the pupils should be the key factor in deciding the manner of deployment and schools should take sufficient time to make this decision. Teachers employed for the CLASS programme should be fully briefed about each pupil's needs and some time should be taken to introduce the teacher to the pupil. In some cases, depending on the nature and degree of supports required for the pupil(s) who will be availing of CLASS provision, it may be appropriate to consider deploying a suitably experienced teacher already within the school who is familiar to the pupil(s). In this case the teacher recruited under CLASS would then temporarily fill the vacant teaching role.

When deployment has been decided, it is the role of the allocated teacher to implement a programme consistent with targets outlined by the school for each pupil. It is anticipated that such programmes would address identified areas of need, help pupils to re-engage with school, support wellbeing and resilience and foster social development.

When the CLASS intervention is complete, the allocated teacher, in consultation with relevant teachers, parents/guardians and the pupil, should update the *Student Support File* accordingly.

How can schools utilize the additional teaching resources under CLASS?

Organising and deploying CLASS teaching resources

Pupils will require some time to settle back into school in September. Teachers will also require time to assess their pupils and to plan interventions which may be necessary. For those reasons, the additional hours provided by the CLASS programme, will be available to schools from 11 October 2021.

Schools should collaboratively cross-reference the needs of pupils and consider common needs that can be met by grouping, to ensure effective and efficient teaching and learning approaches. In consultation with the teacher(s) employed for the CLASS programme it should be agreed how they will support the priority needs of these groups/individuals and when and where the teaching will take place. Schools should ensure that pupils availing of CLASS supports do not inadvertently miss out on other valuable aspects of classroom learning if being withdrawn.

Setting targets

Based on individual priority needs, teachers should set clear learning targets for each pupil for the duration of CLASS. In line with the aims of CLASS, it is essential that pupils, their parents/guardians and relevant school staff are all involved in the planning process, and in identifying key learning objectives and teaching methods. This plan should be formalised within the *Student Support Plan* as part of that pupil's *Student Support File* to target the identified priority needs.

Planning teaching methods and approaches

Teachers should identify the level and type of CLASS intervention required to meet targets for each pupil. Schools should consider methodologies best suited to promoting meaningful inclusion such as differentiation, heterogeneous grouping, team-teaching and small-group teaching. In some cases one-to-one support may be the most appropriate approach. Teachers should also ensure that the interventions and supports that they are using are evidence-informed.

Monitoring, recording and reviewing progress

The primary focus of regular monitoring, recording and reviewing progress is for schools to assess for learning and to adapt strategies, activities and the environment as necessary to enable pupils to meet their key targets. Schools should establish a tracking

and recording system, to ensure that the progress of all pupils participating in CLASS is monitored against the agreed targets This should be documented in the Student Support Plan.

Programme Content

Schools have flexibility to design and implement the CLASS interventions which they deem most suitable for the priority learning needs of participating pupils. Teachers should adopt a flexible and pupil-centred approach when planning CLASS supports for pupils. It is paramount that CLASS planning builds on the individual strengths, interests and priority needs of each pupil by enabling the voice of the pupil, and collaboration with parents, and relevant school staff. Pupils should be provided with opportunities to engage in a variety of enjoyable activities to target the priority learning and wellbeing needs outlined in the pupil's support plan.

Further guidance on how the provision of additional teaching time under CLASS can be utilised to address the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of young people is outlined below.

Promoting and supporting wellbeing

Wellbeing is both a prerequisite and outcome of successful learning. Therefore the additional teaching hours be also be used to support co-curricular and extra- curricular activities to redress any negative impact on learners' wellbeing. The wellbeing of pupils can continue to be supported by fostering resilience using the same five key principles¹ that have been used to foster resilience in school communities throughout the pandemic.

- Promoting a **sense of safety** – so that pupils feel that they are safe, physically and psychologically, and that those around them are safe
- Promoting a **sense of calm** – so that pupils feel relaxed, composed and grounded (regulated)
- Promoting a **sense of belonging and connectedness** – so that pupils experience reconnecting with their friends and colleagues, and those who understand and support them in the school community
- Promoting a **sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy** – so that pupils believe that they can manage and do what is needed individually and as a school community
- Promoting a **sense of hope** – so that pupils believe that things will work out well.

¹ This guidance is underpinned by the framework developed by Hobfoll et al. (2007) for supporting resilience and optimal returning to normalcy during and after traumatic events

For pupils who continue to struggle to re-engage with learning after the initial settling back period, the following approaches may be helpful:

- Adopting a strengths-based approach – using the pupil’s strengths, interests and abilities to build resilience and foster a sense of belonging
- Helping pupils to cope with worries by teaching and practising strategies such as deep breathing, relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, problem-solving by breaking tasks into small, more manageable steps, providing information in accessible format, and using story-telling and other techniques to navigate fears, create solutions and build resilience;
- Fostering social connections and friendships
- Differentiating universal approaches and responses using social stories, schedules, visual approaches etc. Teaching skills to support adapting to new routines when at school, including explicit teaching and support about hygiene requirements using visuals, videos and repetition to reinforce key messages
- Using targeted programmes to develop social and emotional competence
- Ensuring ongoing collaboration between parents, pupils and teachers.

Further suggestions are available in the NEPS Wellbeing Toolkit – *Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs* and in *Starting a New School Year Supporting the Wellbeing of School Communities: Guidance for Schools*².

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/af24b-wellbeing-guidance-documents-for-parents-students-and-schools/>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/wellbeingineducation/wellbeing-in-education.html>

Key Messages

- The extra resources provided to schools under the CLASS support programme should be used for the pupils who are prioritised by the school as having been most impacted by COVID, including those who may not have previously come to the attention of the school as needing extra supports
- The pupils prioritised for support under the CLASS programme should be identified by a robust whole-school collaborative process, in an evidence-based way using the data available in the school

² Further guidance, support and information on CPD opportunities for school staff from Department of Education support services and agencies, in particular NEPS and the NCSE (www.ncse.ie) and HSE services are available on gov.ie/backtoschool webpage.

- The supports provided to existing and newly-prioritised pupils should be tailored to meet the needs of those students in an inclusive manner
- Schools should ensure that the progress of a pupil who is supported by CLASS interventions and resources is measured and reported upon.

Conclusion

The CLASS programme recognises that schools are aware of the negative impact of the pandemic on education, particularly for some learners with SEN and those at risk of educational disadvantage. The programme affords schools the flexibility to implement additional focused educational supports for these learners during the current academic year. The nature of these school-based supports will be determined by the identified needs of the pupils concerned. Schools should ensure that the CLASS supports are prioritised for those learners most impacted by Covid-related school closures and the content and approaches of the programmes should clearly address these identified needs and targets. Teachers recruited to deliver the CLASS programme need to be fully aware of pupils' needs and involved in the target setting process. Internal school monitoring of progress is an essential feature of the CLASS programme. When the CLASS intervention is complete, the allocated teacher in consultation with relevant teachers, parents/guardians and the pupil should update the *Student Support File* accordingly.

Queries relating to effective teaching, learning and assessment approaches outlined in this guidance should be forwarded to: classqueries@education.gov.ie